

The Great Women in Vedic Culture

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Some of the women that have helped make great strides in establishing the foundation of *Sanatana-dharma* and Vedic culture can be listed and described. They serve as fine examples of historical importance that have been the basis for inspiration to both men and women for centuries. From the early Vedic times these include such women as Sati, Sita, Anasuya, Arundhatee, Draupadi, Queen Kunti, Shakuntala, Maitreyi, Gargi, Madalasa, Savitri, Ahalya, and others. It is said simply reciting their names removes sins. There are additional women from the last few hundred years whose lives we can recollect as well. Such great women have contributed to the glories and splendor of Vedic culture. So let us briefly review the lives of some of these great women.

Madalasa was the daughter of Vishvasu, the Gandharva king. She was also a great inspiration to her sons. Ritdhvaj, the son of the powerful king Shatrujit, was her husband. When Shatrujit died, Ritdhvaj took the position of king and engaged in the royal duties. In due course, Madalasa gave birth to a son, Vikrant. When Vikrant would cry, Madalasa would sing words of wisdom to keep him quiet. She would sing that he was a pure soul, that he has no real name and his body is merely a vehicle made of the five elements. He is not really of the body, so why does he cry?

Thus, Madalasa would enlighten her son with spiritual knowledge in the songs she would sing to him. Because of this knowledge, little Vikrant grew up to be an ascetic, free from worldly attachments or kingly activities, and he eventually went to the forest to engage in austerities. The same thing happened to her second son, Subahu, and her third son, Shatrumardan. Her husband told her that she should not teach the same knowledge to their fourth son, Alark, so that at least one of them would be interested in worldly activities and take up the role of looking after the kingdom. So to Alark she sang a song of being a great king who would rule the world, and make it prosperous and free from villains for many years. By so doing he would enjoy the bounty of life and eventually join the Immortals. In this way, she trained her son Alark from the beginning of his life in the direction he would take. This is how a mother can influence her child in whatever potential may be possible, whether materially or spiritually, by imparting noble thoughts to open the avenues of activities for her children.

Sati. From the *Puranas* we learn how Sati would not tolerate the dishonor of her husband Lord Shiva. Sati was the daughter of Prajapati Daksha, who was one of the sons of Brahma. Once Daksha arranged to hold a major religious ritual (*yajna*) in his capital, near present day Haridwar. Many kings, emperors and demigods were invited. However, Daksha did not respect Shiva, so Shiva was not invited. Nonetheless, Sati wanted to go to see her father and many sisters. Shiva tried to dissuade her from going, saying it was not good to go uninvited. But Sati went anyway to participate in the *yajna*. Unfortunately, she found that her father was greatly insulting her husband, Shiva. Not bearing the dishonor of her husband, she self-immolated in fire and left this world altogether, leaving her body in ashes. When Lord Shiva heard about this, he was terribly angry and taking a hair from his head, he threw it to the ground and it turned into the demon Veerabhadra who was the anger of Lord Shiva and who disrupted the *yajna*. In disappointment, Lord Shiva then bore the body of Sati to different places in the world. Sati's various limbs dropped as Shiva carried her body, and wherever a limb dropped became a

Siddhapeetha, which remain major places of Shakti worship. According to the *Devi Bhagavata* there are 108 such Siddhapeethas, while other texts say there are 51. Among these, 42 are in India, 2 in Nepal, 1 in Tibet, 1 in Sri Lanka, 1 in Pakistan, and 4 in Bangladesh. Sati then reincarnated as the daughter of the Himalaya Parvata, and thus she became known as Parvati. She underwent great austerities and won Lord Shiva as her husband once again.

Anasuya was a woman who could bring back the life of a dead sage due to the power of her own austerity and devotion to her husband. She showed that devotion to a qualified husband gives the wife fame, power and is the fulfillment of her dharma. Anasuya was the wife of the sage Atri. Her mother was daughter of the sage Svayambhuva and her father was Kardama Muni. Her fame had spread throughout both the Earth and the planets of the Devas. According to the *Markandeya Purana*, there was once a sage named Mandasya who cursed a brahmana named Kaushika to die the next morning at sunrise. When Kaushiki, Kaushika's wife, heard the news, she vowed that by the power of her chastity the sun would never rise. When the sun did not rise for many days, everyone started to become alarmed. Brahma then told the other demigods to go to Anasuya and she could assist them to continue the sunrise by the force of her moral power. Anasuya then entreated Kaushiki to allow the sunrise to resume. Kaushiki then allowed the sunrise to take place, but her husband immediately expired because of the curse. Yet, Anasuya brought the husband back to life by the power of her own austerity and devotion to her husband. Being pleased by this, the demigods gave Anasuya the blessing to have her wish for three sons who would be reincarnations of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Thus, Brahma appeared as Soma, Vishnu as Dattatreya, and Shiva as Durvasa. Of course she was also greatly honored by her husband who said to Sri Rama when Rama once visited Atri's ashrama during His exile, that Anasuya was a great lady, following the path of austerity and deserves the salutations of all beings. Anasuya was a bright example among women.

Sita is fully described in the *Ramayana*. She was the daughter of King Janaka, ruler of Mithila. The king was engaged in ritually plowing the land to help produce food to counter a famine at the time, and while using a golden plow, it revealed a pitcher that had been buried from which Sita appeared. The plow tip is called a *sita*, thus Sita was the name given to her. At the time, the demon Ravana had collected tax from the local sages who had placed their blood in this pitcher. Thus, when the plow later uncovered and churned the pitcher, the life-force from the sages produced Sita, and Sita thus became the cause of Ravana's destruction. As related in the *Ramayana*, Lord Rama won Sita's hand in marriage. But due to political intrigue, Rama's father, Dasharatha, had to keep a promise he had made to his second wife Kaikeyi, who wanted her own son to ascend the throne and not Lord Rama. So she had Rama and Sita thrown into exile and made to wander the forests. During that time, Ravana abducted Sita and kept Her in the Ashoka-Vatika, the garden of Ashoka trees. He tried to force her to marry him but she would not. During that time Rama and Lakshmana wandered the forests in search of Her. In time they found out she had been taken by Ravana, and having learned where he was, Lord Rama finally put the end to him and rescued Sita.

Even though some citizens doubted Sita's purity, she had undergone the Agni-Pariksha, or witness by fire to attest to her purity as a devoted wife. Even then it was over-heard that a washerman had doubts of Sita's character, having spent so much time in Ravana's house. So to help ward off any criticism, Rama exiled Sita to the forest ashrama of Valmiki. While there she gave birth to, Lava and Kush, the twin sons of Lord Rama. Valmiki once brought Sita and her sons to Ayodhya, the capital of Lord Rama, where the sons sang the *Ramayana* in front of Lord Rama. Valmiki also proclaimed that Sita was as good as purity and chastity incarnate. Though Sita's life was full of struggle and hardship, she was

innocent and pure. She gave up all comforts to serve her beloved husband and uphold sanctity, faithfulness, virtue and moral standards. Thus she holds one of the highest places among women in Vedic culture and of woman's character.

Draupadi was the daughter of Drupada who was the king of Panchala. She was born from the fire ritual and for this reason was also called Yajnaseni. Her dark complexion also gave her the name of Krishnaa. Queen Kunti was the mother of the five Pandava brothers, Arjuna, Bhima, Yudhishthira, Sahadeva and Nakula. When the Pandavas brought Draupadi back to their home, they wanted to show her to their mother, but Kunti, without having seen Draupadi, told them that whatever they have they must all share equally. So Draupadi became the wife of all five Pandavas. It is said that Draupadi in a previous life had been the wife of Indra, the King of heaven, and she took five separate forms in serving her Pandava husbands. Thus, she was most devoted to her five husbands and was also a great devotee of the Supreme Lord, and regarded Lord Krishna as her ultimate protector. One episode that shows this was when in the court of the Kauravas, wicked Dushashana tried to disrobe her in front of everyone. Draupadi became hopeless and fervently prayed to Krishna for protection. Krishna heard her prayers and though He was in Dwaraka, He protected her by providing an endless supply of cloth to her sari so that it never ended, and she was always covered and not dishonored in such a way.

Another time was when Durvasa Muni, who was known for his quick anger, suddenly decided to drop in on the Pandava camp, along with his many thousands of disciples. He would also want something to eat for himself and his followers. But the Pandavas had just ate and there was nothing more to prepare. Lord Krishna asked for whatever remnant grains were left in the pot. Being the Supreme Lord, if He was satisfied, then everyone would be satisfied. So He took what few grains were there and when Durvasa Muni arrived, they were all so full that they no longer wanted anything to eat, and thus left peacefully. In Draupadi's service to her husbands, she had said that she rises before anyone else, tolerates hunger and thirst, and goes to bed after the others. She also gave birth to five sons, all of whom were killed by the wicked Ashwatthama. But since he was the son of the family guru, and she had such respect for their gurus, he forgave him. When the Pandavas had reached the end of their lives and were setting out to ascend to heaven by climbing up into the mountains, she was the last in line. But she was the first to fall and thus rise to heaven after her death. Her dedication and devotion make her one of the great personalities of Vedic culture.

Maitreyi was the wife of the great sage Yajnavalkya. His second wife was Katyayani. Both were devoted to their husband and of lofty character. However, Maitreyi had a higher regard for spiritual knowledge and devotion to God than did Katyayani. The *Brihadaranayaka Upanishad* relates that finally, the sage Yajnavalkya wanted to renounce householder life and accept the sannyasa order of life, and divide his possessions between his two wives. Maitreyi then questioned to herself what greater thing her husband must have found if he is willing to give up his present status in householder life. Surely no one will give up his position unless he finds something better. So she asked her husband if she had all the riches in the world, could she still attain immortality. Her husband said certainly not, it is not possible. All the happiness and conveniences from wealth will not lead you to God. So Maitreyi then asked why she should acquire wealth if it is not going to deliver her from future rounds of birth and death. She requested that he tell her about the Supreme Being, for which he was happily giving up household life.

Therefore, Yajnavalkya explained to Maitreyi all about the divine knowledge of the Self. He informed her that no being in this world has any capability of being dear to another without the

presence of the soul within. Even to enjoy the beauty of this world has no meaning without the soul within our own body, for the soul is all that we are. Understanding the depths of spiritual knowledge is the way to attain *moksha*, liberation from the continued rounds of birth and death. Thus, Yajnavalkya took sannyasa and Maitreyi attained supreme bliss by hearing her husband's discourse and by diving deep into this spiritual understanding. In this way, Maitreyi showed how all women can achieve the heights of spiritual understanding simply by careful listening and practicing the Vedic path.

Gargi was the daughter of Vashaknu, and was also called Vachakni. But because she was born in the line of the Garga Gotra or family line, she was also called Gargi, a name by which she became well known. The *Brihadaranayaka Upanishad* explains that she asked the sage many questions on spiritual science and became highly educated in this way. Once in the court of King Janaka there was arranged to be a debate on the spiritual sciences. He wanted to find out who was the person who knew best the science of the Absolute, and that person would receive 1000 decorated cows with horns plated with gold. None of the local brahmanas complied because they were afraid they would have to prove their knowledge, and may not be up to the task. However, the sage Yajnavalkya told his disciple to take all the cows to his place, which started the debate. Yajnavalkya answered the questions from many scholars who approached him, setting aside all of their concerns and doubts. However, then came Gargi's turn to ask the sage whatever she wanted. But she asked many different and complex questions on the immortality of the soul, the arrangement of the universe, and many other topics. Finally Gargi herself bowed to the sage and proclaimed that there was no one else who was more greatly learned in the Vedic Shastras than Yajnavalkya. In this way, Gargi showed that in Vedic culture it was not unexpected for women to become greatly learned in the Vedic sciences, nor that they could not discuss such topics with wise and kindly sages who also shared their knowledge with them. Thus she is a luminous example of women in the Vedic tradition.

Savitri was the only child of a king named Ashwapati, the king of Madra-Desha, as explained in the *Mahabharata* and *Matsya Purana*. He had performed austerities to please Lord Brahma and his consort, Savitri Devi, to have progeny by chanting the Savitri prayer. When a daughter arrived, he named her Savitri, and she grew to be a girl of great beauty and character, and wonderful personality and qualities. Unfortunately, her father could find no suitable husband for her when she became of age. So he sent her to different parts of the country so she could find a husband she deemed acceptable. After some time Savitri decided to marry Satyavana, but he was the son of Dyumatsena who was the blind and exiled king of Shalya-Desha. Because of this, they lived in the forest. Satyavana was simple but bore a countenance of royalty, which attracted Savitri. Savitri returned to her father to relate the news, however the sage Narada Muni happened to be there and heard it and revealed that Satyavana was highly qualified but was to live for only one year longer. But Savitri had made her decision and would not marry another. So to fulfill Savitri's intention, the king arranged for a wedding. One day, after living in the forest for a year, Satyavana went off to chop some wood as usual. Savitri had been observing penance for many months and followed him into the woods. On this day Satyavana fell down with a headache. At that same time, Savitri saw a ferocious person approaching and could recognize that it was Yama, the lord of death, who was coming to take Satyavana since his life was ending. After Yama had taken Satyavana, Savitri started to follow Yama. He asked her not to follow him and even promised her many boons, all but the life of her husband. Nonetheless, Savitri continued to follow him until he granted her wishes. Savitri asked Yama for her father-in-law's eyesight to return, along with his lost kingdom. Then she asked for one hundred sons for her father. All these were granted as Yama became increasingly impatient. Then she asked for one hundred sons for herself as well, all of them as handsome and wise as Satyavana, to which Yama also agreed without much thought. But then he realized his

mistake and had to allow Satyavana to continue with his life. Thus by the power of Savitri's austerity, wisdom and devotion, she conquered death for her husband and blessed her own father and father-in-law as well.

GREAT WOMEN IN MORE RECENT TIMES:

Sri Gangamata Goswami was born as Sachi, the princess daughter of King Naresh Narayana in the present state of Bengal. She was a great devotee of God from her early childhood. As she grew and entered into her education, she studied grammar and poetry but soon spent all her time studying the Vedic scriptures. All the boys were attracted to her and her father began to think of arranging for her marriage. But she was not the least bit attracted to any young men. She was always filled with thoughts of Madana Gopala, Krishna. Gradually the king and queen grew old and left this world, leaving the responsibilities of governing the kingdom to Sachi. She accepted these, but later arranged to allow other relatives to govern in her place as she went to see the holy places on the plea of traveling throughout the kingdom. After so much travel, she still was not satisfied and wanted to find a spiritual master. Then she went to Jagannatha Puri and while having *darshan* of the Deities she was inspired with an inner message to go to Vrindavana.

After arriving in Vrindavana she met Haridas Pandit, who was solely devoted to Lord Gauranga and Nityananda. Sachi was filled with ecstasy and after meditating for several days Haridas Pandit gave her shelter, upon which she prayed to him with tearful eyes begging for his mercy for spiritual advancement. Haridas discouraged her from staying in Vrindavana, telling her that it is not possible for a princess to remain absorbed in *bhajan* with little to eat and no comforts. But she stayed and gradually gave up her nice clothes and opulent ornaments. Noticing this determination, Haridas instructed with his blessings that she could wander throughout Vrajamandala and beg from place to place as a renounced devotee. Having accepted Haridas as her guru, she was filled with joy. Thereafter, freed from her false ego and dressed in rags, she went begging alms and exhibited her intense renunciation which astonished all the devotees. Her body grew thin and physically exhausted. She would sleep on the banks of the Yamuna and rise to sweep the Lord's temple, have *darshan* and listen to the *Bhagavatam* classes. Haridas became very happy seeing the intent of Sachi and promised to give her initiation into the mantra. Haridas Pandit had another disciple named Lakshmipriya who at that time arrived in Vrindavana. She used to chant 300,000 names of Krishna everyday. Haridas sent her to live near Sachi on the banks of the dhakunda. Everyday Lakshmipriya and Sachi would circumambulate Govardhana Hill. Thus they continued in their devotional service to the Lord with great determination. Then one day Haridas Pandit instructed Sachi to return to Jagannatha Puri to continue her *bhajan* there and preach what she learned of Sri Chaitanya's teachings. However, most of Sri Chaitanya's associates had already left the planet. Sri Sachidevi returned to Jagannatha Puri and stayed in Sarvabhauma's house where she engaged in *bhajan* and gave classes on the *Srimad-Bhagavatam*. She also established first class worship of the Damodara Salagram in that house, which was crumbling and where few people ever visited. However, her classes became famous and many people started to attend to listen to her discourses. One day even the king of Puri, Mukunda Dev, came to hear her *Bhagavatam* class, and he was astounded. He wanted to make a nice offering to her in appreciation for her worship to Lord Krishna, and that night he had a wonderful dream in which Lord Jagannatha appeared to him and said to offer her a place on the banks of the Sveta (White) Ganges. The next day the king went to make the offering to Sachidevi, but she was not inclined to accept any wealth or comforts and wanted to refuse. The king persisted and not wishing to violate Lord Jagannatha's order, he issued a decree dedicating a holy ghat by the side of the White Ganges after Sri Sachidevi. The decree stated that she was a princess that gave up everything to

come to Puri and preach the teachings of Lord Chaitanya. One day Sri Sachidevi wanted to go to the Ganges to bathe, but remembered the order of her spiritual master never to leave Jagannatha Puri. That night she had a dream wherein Lord Jagannatha appeared to her and told her not to worry, that the day when Varuni will take bath is approaching when you must go to bathe in the White Ganges. Gangadevi had been praying for Sachidevi's association, so she should go. Sachidevi was extremely happy, having had this divine vision. The day of the Varuni-snana came and in the middle of the night Sachidevi went to the White Ganges to bathe, but the current of Gangadevi overflowed the pond and carried her away to the Jagannatha Mandira. Seeing this, thousands of devotees became ecstatic and also took their holy bath in the Ganges. In the midst of the commotion, the guards of the Jagannatha temple awoke and were speechless to see all that had happened. Hearing the noise, they went inside the temple. The king had also awoken and ordered the gates of the temple to be opened. When the doors were open, Sachidevi was standing there alone inside the temple. The servants and priests concluded that she must be a thief to steal Jagannatha's valuable ornaments. Then Sachidevi was taken to the dungeon where she was imprisoned to stand trial for theft. Sachidevi was indifferent and remained absorbed in chanting the Lord's holy names. Later that night, Lord Jagannatha appeared to Mukunda Dev in a dream and demanded that he release Sachidevi. The Lord explained that it was because of His personal arrangement to wash Sachidevi's holy feet that He had the Ganga bring Sachidevi to His temple. If the king wanted his life to be auspicious, then he better have all of the pandas and priests bow at her feet and beg for forgiveness, and the king must take initiation from her. The next day the king did as he was told, making sure that everyone paid full obeisances to her while asking for forgiveness for the offenses made at the feet of a devotee. He also begged that she accept him as a disciple and give him initiation.

Sachidevi became very joyful, understanding that this was all due to the arrangement of the Lord. Placing her hand on the king's head, she blessed him, and soon thereafter she gave him initiation into the eighteen syllable Radha-Krishna mantra. Many of the priests also took shelter of her on that day. It was from that day that Sachidevi became known as Gangamata Goswamini. One day a strict smarta-brahmana, Mahidhara Swami, came to the banks of the Sveta-Ganga and wanted to have *darshan* of her holy feet. He had come to offer worship for his ancestors and while in discussion with Sri Gangamata Goswamini, she instructed the *Srimad-Bhagavatam* to him. The brahmana was astonished by her explanations and asked to take shelter of her. On an auspicious day she initiated him into the Radha-Krishna mantra of ten syllables. On the order of Sri Gangamata Goswamini, he preached the message of nama-prema, ecstasy of the holy name, and the teachings of Lord Chaitanya throughout Bengal.

Sri Sita Thakurani is the eternal wife of Sri Advaita Acharya, who is considered an avatara of Maha-Vishnu. Sita Thakurani is to be worshiped as much as Mother Sachidevi, the mother of Sri Chaitanya. She married Advaita Acharya in Phuliya Nagara and they moved to Shantipura. Sita Thakurani was always absorbed in motherly devotion to Sri Chaitanya and would instruct Jagannatha Misra, Sri Chaitanya's father, on how to care for the boy. Advaita Acharya was the one who did special worship near the Ganges in Shantipur to call the Lord to appear in this world, having felt that the conditions were so bad that only the Lord Himself could help. Thus, both Advaita Acharya and Sita Thakurani were in great bliss when Sri Chaitanya appeared in this world, and she brought Him many presents. From then on, Sri Sita Thakurani would often come to Mayapur from Shantipur to see the child and to give instructions to Sachimata about how to care for the child. The *Gaura-Ganodesha Dipika* explains that Sri Sita Thakurani is an incarnation of Yogamaya. The *Gaura-Parshada-Chiritvali* says that in the Krishna pastimes she was Purnamasi, the mother of Sandipani Muni, grandmother of Madhumangal and Nandimukhi, and a disciple of Narada Muni. The *Gaura-Ganodesha Dipika* however says that Purnamasi in the Krishna pastimes went on to become Sri Govinda Acharya in the Chaitanya pastimes. When Sri

Chaitanya was grown, he went to Gaya and became initiated by Iswara Puri. Afterwards he returned to Mayapur and started His *sankirtana* pastimes. Sri Advaita Acharya and Sita Thakurani were the first to worship Sri Chaitanya at the beginning of His real purpose in this world. After Sri Chaitanya took sannyasa and went to Jagannatha Puri to live, Sri Advaita Acharya and Sita Thakurani would go and visit Him, bringing their own son, Achyutananda. On one such occasion Sita Thakurani made many of the Lord's favorite preparations and invited Him to their place to take lunch. Simply to increase their ecstasy, the Lord honored their invitation. Always being absorbed in motherly affection, she treated Him like her own son and He returned the sentiment. Sri Sita Thakurani bore three sons, Achyutananda, Krishna Mishra and Gopala Mishra. Thus, she was an inspiration for spreading the mission of the *sankirtana* movement.

Sri Jahnava Mata was born of Sri Suryadasa, along with her sister Sri Vasudha. The *Gaura-Ganodesha-dipika* explains that They are both expansions of Varuni (Sri Vasudha) and Revati (Jahnava Mata), and that they are both incarnations of Ananga-manjari. In time the daughters became of marriageable age and Suryadasa gave it much thought. The one night he had a dream in which he gave both of his daughters to Sri Nityananda. Surya dasa then told a brahmana friend about this and it was arranged to deliver the message to Sri Nityananda Himself. Upon hearing of it He agreed, after which the ecstasy of Suryadasa knew no bounds. Arrangements were made for the wedding at Borogacchi Gram, and many devotees from all around attended (the full details of which are recorded in the *Bhakti-Ratnakara*). Thus, Suryadasa was most fortunate to have given both of his daughters to Sri Nityananda Prabhu. Lord Nityananda stayed in Shaligrama Pura for a while but then went to Nabadvipa to show His mother Sachideva His two wives. Sachimata was delighted to see them. On the order of Sachimata, Nityananda went to the house of Advaita Acharya in Shantipura. When his wife Sita Thakurani saw Vasudha and Sri Jahnava, she floated in waves of ecstasy. Sri Nityananda wandered from place to place performing any *sankirtana* pastimes (congregational singing of the Lord's holy names). In due course, Sri Vasudhadevi gave birth to a daughter named Ganga and a son named Virachandra. However, Sri Jahnavadevi had no children. As time passed, Sri Nityananda Prabhu, Advaita Acharya, Shrivasa Pandita, and many other members of Lord Chaitanya's personal entourage left this world to return to the spiritual domain. Sri Jahnava Mata still wanted to inundate the world with a flood of *sankirtana* nectar. In Kheturi Gram at that time was a great festival to be held on the celebration day of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's advent. Many devotees attended, like Narottama, Shyamananda and Shrinivas. The festival had been arranged by King Santosh Dutta. Sri Jahnava herself attended the festival and cooked the food for offering to the Gaura-Nitai Deities there. After the festival for one night, they went on to Nabadvipa. However, Sri Jahnava did not get to see Sachimata, Lord Chaitanya's mother, and felt very unhappy. She went on to the home of Sripati and Srinidhi, but again was heartbroken because of not seeing Srivasa Pandit and Malinidevi there. After spending the night they went on to Shantipura and again discovered that Sri Advaita Acharya and his wife Sita Thakurani had also both passed away. Though greeted by their sons, Achyutananda and Gopala, Sri Jahnava was filled with grief. Sri Jahnava Mata continued to travel with her associates and devotees, always gathering to perform *sankirtana*, the congregational chanting and singing of the Lord's holy names. In this way, many devotees were able to drown themselves in the nectar of *kirtana*, and even many atheists and sinners were greatly purified. On one special occasion at Kheturi Gram, even Lord Chaitanya and Lord Nityananda, who had already left this world, made Their divine appearance again in the midst of the *kirtana*. Sri Jahnava Mata was a wonderful cook and would prepare herself such dishes as rice, vegetable preps, and other foods to be offered to the Deities at such festivals. Thereafter, she would distribute the *prasada* (offered food) herself with her own hand to the great souls who were gathered there. When Sri Jahnava went to visit Vrindavana, she was greeted by many great devotees, and her ecstasy was unlimited. The Gosvamis

offered their *pranams* and she also offered her obeisances in return. She was very happy seeing the efforts of the Gosvamis in renovating the holy land. She toured the holy places of Vrindavana and saw the different Deities. After visiting the many pilgrimage places, she returned to Gaudadesha, Bengal. While there she also visited the town of Sri ityananda's birth, Ekachakra, and was filled with ecstasy to see where He partook of childhood pastimes. She continued her travels, returning to Nabadvipa and seeing the birthplace of Lord Chaitanya Mahaprabhu where she fainted in ecstasy. She then went to the nearby courtyard of Srivasa, where she spent the night and the devotees engaged in a great *sankirtana*, for this is where Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu began His *sankirtan* movement. That night she had a dream of Lord Chaitanya in which He performed different pastimes. In this way, Jahnava Mata continued in her pastimes of traveling to visit various devotees and engaging in *sankirtana* festivals, cooking food to be offered to the Deities, and even witnessing the appearance of Lord Chaitanya and Nityananda in the midst of some of those ecstatic *kirtans*. She continued to deliver the love of *bhakti* (devotion) to numerous people, even atheists and materialists by her mercy. Thus, being considered the divine *shakti* of Lord Nityananda Himself, she continued the mission of Lord Chaitanya and Lord Nityananda by her activities, which centered around *sankirtana* and cooking and distributing *prasada* to everyone.

Vishnupriya devi is the wife of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and appeared to assist with His mission of spreading the holy name of Krishna. She is said to be the internal potency of the Lord known as Bhushakti. Thus, Sri Chaitanya and Vishnupriya are as Vishnu and Lakshmi combined again. Vishnupriya was the daughter of Sanatana Mishra. He was a highly developed Vishnu bhakta. He was pious and generous and would feed, clothe and shelter many people. He was famous as the king of pandits. It is said that he was a king named Satrijit in the age of Dvapara-yuga. It was a result of his great devotion that he was blessed with such a qualified daughter. Vishnupriya was devoted to her parents and would bathe in the Ganga three times a day and observed many different vows of spiritual austerity, and was devoted to the shastric principles. Everyday when she would bathe in the Ganga, she would also bow at the feet of Mother Sachi, the mother of Sri Chaitanya, and Mother Sachi would bless her that Krishna may provide her with a qualified husband. Upon further enquiry Mother Sachi learned that she was the daughter of Sanatana Mishra, a qualified pandita of Nabadvipa, and she began to think that Vishnupriya may make a good wife for her own son Nimai, Sri Chaitanya. At this time, Sri Chaitanya's first wife, Lakshmipriya, had passed away and entered the spiritual domain. So Mother Sachi was in great pain at first, but started to think how to arrange for her son's happiness. When she learned that He did not mind the idea of marrying again, Sachi began to make plans in earnest to have her son remarried, and proposed that a match be made with Vishnupriya. She made consultation with Sanatana Mishra and he agreed and was pleased. It was arranged by the people and devotees to be a grand event. (This is fully explained in the *Chaitanya Bhagavata*.)

Sri Vishnupriya spent her life as a devoted wife. Even when Sri Chaitanya took sannyasa to engage completely in His purpose of preaching and spreading the glories of Krishna's holy names, Vishnupriya stayed with Mother Sachi, engaging in service to the Lord together. Later, Vishnupriya had her own Deity of Sri Chaitanya and worshiped that Deity until she left this world at the age of 92. This Deity is still worshiped in Nabadvipa in a temple where you can visit and have *darshan* of this same Deity. In this way, she also assisted in the continuation of Sri Chaitanya's *sankirtana* movement and in the principles of Vedic culture.

Rani Chennamma of Kittur (in North Karnataka) was the first woman freedom fighter of India against the British. Rani Chennamma was known for her chivalry. She was born in 1778 and from

childhood she trained herself in warfare. Her husband, Raja Mallasarja of Kittur, died in 1816 and her only son died in 1824. Chennamma adopted Shivalingappa as her son, but the British did not accept this. The Rani fought tirelessly with the British and with the help of her bodyguard, Balappa, she killed the British Southern provincial officer, Thackray. The British, however, regrouped and attacked Kittur. They followed non-Kshatriya methods and defeated and imprisoned her in Bailhongal. She was a great devotee of Lord Shiva. She died on 21-2-1829.

Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi was one of the most brave and legendary of warrior women of India. The city of Jhansi was an important center in the 18th century, but in 1803 the British East India Company took over control of the state. The last raja at the time died without a son in 1853. The British had passed a law that allowed them to assume control of any state under their patronage if the ruler died without a male heir. The Rani of Jhansi, however, did not like this enforced retirement and preferred to rule on her own. So she was ready for the rebellion at Jhansi when the Indian Mutiny began. The British in Jhansi were killed, but the next year the British took Jhansi because of the disunity among the rebel forces. The Rani fled to Gwalior and while there made a defiant last stand. Disguised as a man, she rode out to battle against the British, but was unfortunately killed. Her qualities of boldness, patriotism, and generalship were highly appreciated, even by her foreign rivals. Since then she has been a heroine of the independence movement of India. The hilltop fortress of Chittorgarh was another but more general example of the chivalry of the Rajputs and the warrior spirit of the women. The fort has a long history. In 1303 was when the Pathan King of Delhi, Ala-ud-din Khilji, attacked the fort in an attempt to capture the queen Padmini, wife of Bhim Singh, the Rana's uncle. When it was obvious that defeat was inevitable, the Rajput noblewomen, which included Padmini, committed Sati while Bhim Singh, knowing of his certain defeat, nonetheless took his men and put on the saffron robes of martyrdom and rode to battle and to their deaths. Honor was more important than death to them, and the women also would rather die than submit to the enemy and certain humiliation. Another such event at Chittorgarh took place in 1535 when the Sultan of Gujarat, Bahadur Shah, besieged the fort, and once again the Rajputs did what they could. It is said that 13,000 Rajput women and 32,000 Rajput warriors died in the battle. The last of such scenes took place in 1568 when the Moghul Emperor, Akbar, took the town. The women again performed Sati and 8000 saffron clad warriors rode out to their deaths. Again death was better than submitting to the Muslim invaders.

Devi Ahalya Bai Holkar, the queen of Indore (Madhya Pradesh) has set an excellent example of efficient administration. Her contribution to encourage free trade and the concept of the welfare state is very admirable. Her practices for maintaining integral nationality, her quick impartial justice were very effective. She led a very simple and selfless life, not utilizing anything from the royal treasury for her personal use.

Jijabai was not exactly a warrior herself but was the mother of Shivaji, one of the great protectors of the country and its religion. She was the guide who shaped his mind from his early years. She was the embodiment of self-respect. She nurtured her child to fight and bring back Hindu Rashtra and became a constant source of inspiration to her heroic son.

Mira Bai is another name that many people will recognize for her saintly loving attachment to Lord Krishna. Her history is not so clear, but it is generally accepted that she was born in 1498 in a village near Merta about 40 to 50 miles northwest of Ajmer. She was the daughter of Ratna Singh, a Rajput noble and warrior who was much involved in fighting. Mira's mother died when she was still very young. For these reasons she was sent to live with her grandfather, Rau Dudaj, who had taken the town from

the Muslims to repopulate it with Hindus. Mira was a devotee of Krishna from very young. One story is that even before her mother died, Mira begged for an image of Krishna from a holy man who had visited her home, which she received. She became so attached to the Deity that her mother would joke that Krishna would become her bridegroom. Mira's family were all Vaishnavas and regular worship was a common event in their home. Later, Mira's grandfather died and her uncle Viramji took responsibility of her. In 1508 Rana Sangh, the great Rajput warrior, tried to arrange for the defense of the oncoming Muslims by marrying Dhan Bai of the Jodhpur branch of the House of Rathor, and thus establish alliances with other local rulers. He also arranged with Viram Dev for the marriage of Mira to his own heir, Prince Bhoja Raj, in 1516. This was supposed to secure an alliance of power to the north. So in 1516 Mira was married to Bhoja Raj, but the marriage was childless. Mira was never interested in the marriage and was completely preoccupied with her devotion to Lord Krishna, who in her poems she refers to as her husband, and to herself as a virgin. It is said that Bhoja Raj was frustrated with her for a while but gradually understood the devotional nature of Mira and did not expect her to play the typical role as a wife. There is a temple that is said to have been built for Mira Bai at the Chittorgarh Fort where she would worship her Deity of Lord Krishna. You can still visit this temple if you ever go to this fort.

War was common place at the time and in one such battle Mira's father, Ratna Singh, was killed. Even Mira's uncle was attacked by an opposing family, and Mira was increasingly left alone to her own devices. This was most often based on her devotion to Krishna. The marriage of Mira to help military alliances did not work out well for Mira because 15 years later, in 1531, when Rana Sangh had been dead for 3 years, Vikramajita (Vikramaditya), who was a mere boy of 14, acceded the Kingdom of Mewar and was most temperamental. [Rana Raymal reigned at Chittor 1473-1508. Rana Sangh was his son.] This put Mira in the spite of members of a rival family. Vikramajita did not like Mira and it is said at one point he locked her in a room with a guard. This did not have the desired effect, so he tried to poison her, but that also failed. She refers to this in her poems as the intervention of her Lord Krishna. It is thought that Mira took refuge of her uncle Viram Dev in Merta until Viram was expelled from his own capital by the King of Jodhpur in 1538. From this point, the rest of Mira's story is unclear. However, there are a few bits and pieces that seem to stand correctly. In the first half of the 17th century Mira is said to have visited Vrindavan. She may have been a wandering ascetic after Viram was forced from Merta. The poet of Priyadas who was at Vrindavan at the time says that Mira went to see Jiva Gosvami of Sri Chaitanya's association, but Jiva refused to see her because she was a woman. She replied that she thought Lord Krishna was the only male in Vrindavana and all others were female *gopis* (cowherd maidservants). This led to Jiva Gosvami admitting her into see him. There is also an old temple in Vrindavana that is still dedicated to her presence there, and there is an altar with nice Krishna Deities you can see there. Other histories say that she went to Dwaraka and lived there for a considerable time, worshipping at the temple there.

The death of Mira Bai in 1614 is also unclear, but it is said that in course of time, evil fell on the fort of Chittor where Mira's family members lived, and where they began to think that the decline of the fortress was because of their persecution of a great devotee, namely Mira. The king sent a message begging for her to return, but she took shelter at the temple of Ranchor (Krishna) to pray, and it is said that her body melted into the Deity. In any case, Mira's poems remain an inspiration to many, and stir the heart toward devotion to Krishna in many ways. They also emphasize the means of developing attraction to Krishna's form, pastimes and the chanting of His names, and exemplifies a love relationship with the Lord.

Vandaniya Lakshmibai Kelkar (Kamal as she was known as a little girl) is another woman who did a tremendous amount of work for India and its culture. She was born on July 6, 1905 to Bhaskar Rao Datey and her mother Yasodabai. Kamal grew up in a congenial environment which molded her into a sensitive and intelligent girl. She learned the qualities of serving others to assist in their needs from her aunt who continually worked to ease the plight of people affected by the plague. Kamal was also imbued with devotion to India and its culture, and developed an acute sense to organize and execute plans for its preservation. This was due to her mother who would read to the local ladies the national newspapers to enlighten them about the oppressions committed by the British. Though this was viewed by the British rulers as an act of treason, she asserted that as a free person and not a Government servant she had the right to read such papers. In the meantime, Kamal was admitted to the only available convent school in town, but shortly left because of the Christian domination in it. She grew to be a lovely teenager but was determined not to marry anyone that demanded dowry. So she later married a widower, Purushottam Kelkar. He had two daughters from his first marriage. In the wedding, Kamal was given the name Lakshmi, meaning prosperity. In her marriage she took care of her two daughters, managed the household and in time became the mother of six sons. Lakshmi was not satisfied with mere household duties. She also had the spirit of patriotism, sacrifice and social reform. She was waiting for the chance to participate in the freedom movement. She attended meetings and listened to the top leaders of the movement and observed the effects of the Law Defiance Movement, along with the gradual change in the social psyche. She felt that obtaining political freedom was necessary, but that every citizen of free Bharat must come forward with a firm common will and total identification with the national interests, ancient glories, the Vedic culture and traditions of Bharat. But how to put this all together was the issue. During this time some eminent personalities were striving for the education of women. Due to Western impact, Indian women were struggling for equal rights and economic freedom. Yet this led to progress of the individual but not for the society as a whole, and to self-centeredness. This presented the risk of women losing their commitment to love, sacrifice, service and other inborn qualities that glorify Hindu women. She felt that this attraction to the easy and showy way of western life that led to this unnatural change in the attitude of women could also lead to the disintegration of family, which has been a primary and important factor in Vedic society for imparting the proper Vedic culture. So Lakshmibai was worried by this.

After attending discourses by Gandhi and hearing him advising the ladies to follow the life of Sita and Savitri, she studied the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. She was attracted to the literature of Swami Vivekananda who professed that men and women are equally important constituents of the nation just like two wings of a bird. Lakshmibai came to the conclusion that women should boldly come forward and share the responsibility in solving the various problems of the society. Lakshmibai lost her husband in 1923 and was left to look after eight children and a vast property. She faced the situation and still pursued her national commitments. Later, through her sons, she learned of an organization based on individual contact, mutual love and voluntary discipline called the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh. She thought that this type of organization would also work well for meeting the challenge among women. After meeting with Dr. Hedgewar about her ideas, she formed an organization for women called Rashtra Sevika Samiti on Vijaya Dashami Day, October 25, 1936. She sketched the working plan for the organization and shouldered all the responsibility herself. As the organization grew, among its members Lakshmibai was called by her family nickname of "Mousiji", but they prefixed it with "Vandaniya" to show their respect. Vandaniya Mousiji's talent of nursing became especially useful, since she had to nurse a number of ailing minds from all kinds of weaknesses. It was difficult in those days for a socially and economically well placed young widow to get involved in work wherein prestige, honor and fame were never to be aspired for. In the beginning she was also too shy to deliver speeches and often would

ask a friend to do it for her. But through perseverance, firm will and relentless practice she slowly acquired most of the qualities to lead the organization. The basic premise of the organization was the practice and promotion of Vedic culture in its relevance to modern times. She convinced many women to do the same by protecting it through the natural process of imparting the proper impressions at home, especially to her children. It is through this process that a mother's power can build a strong character-based society. To set the proper example, she introduced Devi Ashtabhujā, a symbol of the ideal Hindu woman with eight (*ashta*) specific qualities, such as chastity, boldness, affection, alertness, etc., that every woman should have. To organize and inspire the women, there were regular meetings. And to spread it, Mousiji started touring with what little transportation that could be arranged, traveling alone and with her small son, depending on God to avoid the risks. Gradually, the Samiti grew to a national organization, holding special gatherings in places like Mumbai. Taking a special interest in education, the "Bharatiya Shri Vidya Niketan" was registered in 1983 to reorganize the system of girls' education.

Having studied the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Bhagavata Purana*, she gave discourses on them and inspired many women to inculcate the firm will, sanctity of thought and deed, and the self-protecting spiritual power like that of Sita and Draupadi. Her discourses became popular and large numbers of people would throng to hear her sweet voice and logical interpretation. She could convince many younger generations to look on Vedic culture as their national heritage and the divine personalities such as Sri Krishna, Sri Rama and Sita, and Savitri as national heroes and heroines. Vandaniya Mousiji was very affectionate and loving as a mother but equally strict as a general in organizational matters. The individual attention that she showed on each sevika volunteer made them feel that Mousiji loved her the most. Vandaniya Mousiji passed away on November 27, 1978 at the age of 73. The news spread quickly and many members came to pay their last homage to one of the recent architects of "Modern Vedic Women". Through her foresightedness she had already made arrangements and had appointed leaders to continue the work without any confusion after her passing. The Samiti was then lead by Vandaniya Saraswatibai (Taiji Apte) until her passing on March 9, 1994. During her tenure the organization even spread outside India. The Samiti has since been lead under the loving and careful guidance of Vandaniya Ushatai Chati, who had been appointed by Taiji Apte herself. Thus, from the efforts of Mousiji, the women volunteers of the Samiti are continuing in the protection and promotion of Vedic culture.

conclusion

There are many other women I could have included in this article, especially those who have been recognized as saints and guardians of Vedic culture, such as Anandamayi Ma who lived in Vrindavana. And presently there are such women as Mother Karunamayi and Mother Amritanandamayi Ma whose life stories are also inspirational, and who are traveling throughout the world and actively preserving and expanding the understanding of various aspects of the Vedic tradition. Because they offer the unconditional love of a spiritual mother for their spiritual children, their popularity is one of the reasons why thousands of people, especially women, have been attracted to such lady pioneers in spirituality. The world is like a desert craving for the rejuvenation and reciprocation of such love. Why would it not be attractive? Even now there are a host of other women that I have met, whether they are in the Rashtra Seviki Samiti, Iskcon, Vivekanandra Kendra, Arun Jyoti, Swadyaya, Kalyan Ashrama, or other

organizations, all working in various ways in their humble service to God, as well as for the protection and advancement of Vedic culture.

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